Dear Mother:

It's Sunday. It's raining hard. It's dreary outside.

I woke up this morning with a sense of dread. You've been gone for 40 years. I last wrote to you 39 years ago. After you died, I wrote to you every day for a year, then I stopped. Today will be the day I write again.

A while back, I attended a conference on wrongful convictions and the death penalty. While there, I ran into Tim Hennis. He was sentenced to death after being convicted of rape and murder but was later acquitted. He wanted to be there to support the falsely accused, but he didn't want to walk across that stage and speak out loud, "My name is Timothy Hennis." Too shy? Too hard? Maybe he worried he wouldn't be able to get through it. Just like I worry about writing to you.

The beauty I find in helping the falsely accused is something I like about myself. It's the deeper part of who I am, and maybe this has something to do with you. I wasn't always like this. There is written proof in my diary that before you died, my l4-year-old mind was soaked with thoughts of teenage boys:

Wednesday, April 29, 1959. I had so much fun at school. Wowsville. Tonight, John called again, and so did this guy named Hil Silvers. We talked for over an hour. He's an A+ doll. Neal's been mean lately. I don't know what's wrong, but I like him muchly.

Friday, May 8, 1959. Tonight I had a party. There were 16 kids, and then a bunch from Duke's came. It was really blasty except for the fact that David kept bothering us. One of the guys, from Reviere, is named Harry Watkins, and now I have a crush on him--he's so darling. I like Nealie, too, but after 16 months I can't help my crushes on other guys.

Reading my diary entries written before you died, I see a picture of a self-absorbed adolescent. I read page after page hoping for some modicum of self-examination. Of course, back then, my somewhat steady boyfriend Neal would try to read my diary, and I do remember writing only good things in case he got his hands on it. Because I was so self-conscious that someone might find my unhappy thoughts, I occasionally wrote them on separate pieces of paper then clipped them to the diary. They were my removable truths. If Neal ever said, "If you love me, you'll let me read the diary," I could easily unclip these private entries.

So I wonder now how much of my diary is what novelist Tim O'Brien calls "happening truth" (the indisputable reality of what happened) and how much of it is "story truth" (the personal colorized version of what happened)? Memories, with or without diaries, that supposedly record the past, are generally colorized versions of the past. That's something I've learned in spades through my work. But there I go, digressing, trying to busy myself with work matters. It's hardest for me to reread the diary entries written right before you died. Those summer days at the lake at Bear Rock--the swimming, the cabins, the teenage boys. It's all about to come to an end.

I felt my stomach tightening when I saw my entry two days before you died:

Nothing much happened today. Just usual stuff. Tonight my dad called and we were very happy. My mother and I had a long talk until midnight about her childhood and other things. I was really happy because we'd never been too close before, and now we were talking like we really were.

And then the worst happened.

Today, July 10, 1959, was the most tragic day of my life. My dearly beloved mother, whom I had just gotten to be really close with, died. We woke up this morning and she was missing, and an hour later we found her in the swimming pool. Only God knows what happened. I know that life must go on and that we all must be brave. I try to tell myself that she is gone only physically and that her soul and her love remain with us. Now that she is gone, I realize how very much I love her and how hard it will be to carry on. I feel so empty inside, like I lost a big part of me. If my mother could hear me I would want her to know that she has all my love and always will.

The day after you died, I began to write to you. I wrote to you every day. "Dear Mother" or "Dear Mom." Signed "Love, Beth" or "Lovingly, Beth." And sometimes "Love forever." I wrote about the sympathy cards we received. I wrote to tell you that "you were, and still are, the kindest, most wonderful person who has ever lived." I wrote about all the people crying at your funeral, "Everyone was crying so hard, including myself. I thought I'd faint--it took so much out of me."

But the diary reveals that my teenage self-absorption returned. I'm embarrassed to read how few days had passed before this happened. A month had hardly gone by, and I'm telling you which boys called me that day. I even wrote to you about a New Year's Eve party I attended:

December 31, 1959. Dear Mom--I was with Kenny all night. We went to a party at Bob D'Amore's first. Some girl got drunk, passed out and barfed all over her date. Poor guy. At twelve, Kenny kissed me, we were watching TV, and everyone threw streamers. It's sort of sad to leave this year behind, it was such a wonderful year for me. Goodbye, 1959! Love, Beth.

Wonderful year? Who was I kidding? It was an awful year.

From the diary, there were only a few signs of pain, of depth, and these are mostly in the removable notes. In one of them, stained by a rusted paper clip, I wrote:

MY GREATEST REGRET: Many nights, such as tonight, September 23, 1959, I lie awake and think about my mother. Always, I start to cry, and my thoughts trace back to the days when she was alive and ill. She would be watching TV and ask me to come sit by her. "I'm busy now," was my usual reply. Other times, she would be in my room, and we would get in fights because she wouldn't leave. Oh, how I hate myself for that! With a little bit of kindness from her only daughter she might have been so much happier. Why wasn't I nicer to my mother, whom I loved and love more than anyone else in the world? Why wasn't I?

Today, I still regret that I wasn't nicer to you, but it is not my greatest regret. It's just one of many. I see now that your death wasn't my fault. Intellectually, I do know that's true, although the l4-year-old Beth perhaps did not. I thought then that eventually I would get over your death. I know today that I won't. But I've decided to accept that truth. What does it matter if I don't get over you? Who says I have to? David and Robert still tease me: "Don't say the M word or Beth will cry." So what if the word motheraffects me this way? Who says I have to fix this? Besides, I'm too busy

I went on to become a university professor and research psychologist, devoting my life to the study of memory. I've discovered some difficult truths: namely that memory can be changed, inextricably altered, and that what we think we know, what we believe with all our hearts, is not necessarily the truth.

But I am a workaholic. Why? Does it do for me what the seemingly endless collection of teenage boys did 40 years ago? Does it help me escape my painful thoughts? Does it help me feel an importance that is and was otherwise missing from my life?

There is one entry in the diary, not long after you died, where the 14-year-old Beth wrote to you about something other than boys:

Dear Mother--Dad has gotten on some "strict kick." He says I can't go out as much, darn near a flat "no beach parties," and "do some things with girls for a change." For heaven's sake, I'm looking for a husband (naturally, not quite yet) not a lesbian! Maybe I'm saying this in a moment of anger, but I feel like the one thing missing in my life is a family love and closeness. Will explain later. Lovingly, Beth.

I never did explain later. The letters to you ended. But as I reread the past, and as I write this now, I see a connection between me then and me now. I'm learning something from her. Me then: Busy with boys, and I didn't have to think about what was missing in life. Me now: Busy with work, and I don't have to think much about what is missing in life. A family love and closeness--that's what I miss. That's what I miss about you.

Love forever,

Beth